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Sufism as a Tool to De-radicalize, Depoliticize, Depolarize, and Reclaim Islam, with a Focus on Mitigating the Sunni Shi'a Split: Artist's Statement

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Sufism as a Tool to De-radicalize, Depoliticize, Depolarize, and Reclaim Islam, with a Focus on
Mitigating the Sunni Shi'a Split: Artist's Statement

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Abstract:

Over the last decades in the Middle East and North Africa, there has been much governmental change in both incorporating and letting go of religious practices and influence, and this incorporation has been linked to many conversations on human rights, free-will and choice, and democracy (Tessler 2002). Additionally, Muedini writes about how Sufism and its increase has affected politics in both Algeria and Morocco, in which he suggests that Sufism has led to a less extreme take on religion, and that it can be used to “counter Islamist organizations that are politically challenging to the government” (Muedini 2012, p. 201). For this reason, I propose the theory that Sufism contains the values, principles, and internal control needed in order to alleviate the relevance of politicized polarizations, like the Shi’a-Sunni divide, and an overall reclaiming of religion through depolarization, depoliticization, and internalization, giving individuals greater agency and choice over themselves, their practice, and their religion. To manifest this theory, I have created a 14-piece mixed-media art gallery in which I dissect and challenge my theory. Due to the abstract nature of both art and Sufism, the gallery space is fluid in interpretation and intentionally does not point to a set, clear message. In the following statement, supplementing digital copies of my 14 works, I will elaborate on my gallery space, including themes, intersectionality, symbolisms, and intended impact of my presentation and how that links back to my idealized theory about Sufism.

Artist's Statement:

My art aims to present an idealized, theorized manifestation of the shift to Sufism as something that can reclaim religion, and wipe out its polarized, politicized, and manipulative uses, and give the practicing individual agency over themselves, their practice, and their religion. In an abstract, ambiguous exploration of symbols and themes founded in the origins of Sufism and mystical doctrines, I present an analysis of current religious climates juxtaposed with the take over of an idealized and radically de-radicalizing, mystical Sufism.

While engaging with my works, two things are critical to keep in mind. First, I delve into Sufi literature in the most original and basic form, and refrain from colonial lens gazes on an orientalized portrait of Sufism to inform my work. When examining Sufi literature, it is important to distinguish what is written pre-colonially, by Sufis about Sufis, and post-colonially, by colonizers to understand religion of their colonized, done so through an orientalized, diminishing lens, that often times incorporated post-Sufi, colonial ideas, such as racial divide and pantheism. (Khalil & Sheikh, 2014). Keeping the existence and influence of this colonial history and literature that came from it in mind, the focus of the literature I use to inform my works are works about mystics and about how they viewed their relationship with religion and with Allah, in order to look at the idealized and personalized representation that I aim to find and represent in my gallery space.

Secondly, it is critical to note that my gallery space in no way is based on fool-proof, quantitative research on Sufism. Rather, it is a theoretical exploration of themes presented in Sufism, and a hypothesis regarding how these themes could lead to a de-radical reclaim of religion. The abstraction of this space also intentionally plays into the theoretic nature of my

ideas, as different gazes are allowed to theorize in different ways, based on how they interact with the gallery space and the individual pieces.

The word “Sufism” stems from the Greek word, “Sophia” which means wisdom. However, it is also a word that refers to *soof* clothing, or woolen clothing, which is a sign of abstemiousness and disassociation from the worldly life. Sufism is seen as different things by different mystics, but all in all, it is a dissociative form of belief in Allah, with no intermediaries, and nothing but love and devotion for Allah and the desire to serve him (Haadee Al- Madkhalee, 1999).

One thing that attracted many people to Sufism came in an ideology of the faith—one that many people are repulsed by, but many people are drawn to. This is also one of the most controversial elements of Sufism, and one that permeates into the global Muslim community to create a stigma against Sufism. This ideology is that Allah dwells amongst human souls and is incarnate in all of humanity and within all people. This belief is referred to as *hulool*. Al-Hallaaj, a Sufi and believer in *hulool* said, “I am the one who loves and the One who is loved is me, We are two spirits who dwell in a single body. So when you see me you see Him, and when you see Him you see us both.” (Haadee Al- Madkhalee, 1999, p.12) In saying this, he demonstrated that he believes in the duality of Allah as something both human and divine, so much of each that he believed that his humanness was a vessel for Allah.

Another common belief among Sufis is that the texts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah have two meanings. One is the outer, apparent, portrayed meaning, and the other is the hidden, internalized meaning. This duality pushes Sufis to look beyond what is said and written into a deep meditative, pensive gaze at religious texts in order to personalize and internalize what is

written (Haadee Al- Madkhalee, 1999).

Ibn 'Arabee, a Sufi mystic, believes that all people regardless of whether or not they worship Allah actually end up truthfully worshipping Allah because in his view, Allah is everything and everywhere. He writes, "So the person with complete understanding is he who sees every object of worship to be a manifestation of the truth contained therein for which it is worshipped. Therefor they all call it a god, along with its particular name, whether it is a rock, or a tree, or an animal, or a person, or a star, or an angel" (Haadee Al- Madkhalee, 1999, p. 19). Through this viewpoint, Ibn 'Arabee shares that he beliefs that all religions are one in the same, and that he wholeheartedly accepts all religions and all sects of all religions, to the point where he warns his followers against believing completely in one particular religion and disbelieving others.

Additionally, Sufi mystic 'Abdul-Kareem al-Jeelee also believes in the oneness of all religions and the fluidity amongst them. He writes, "Sometimes you may see me bowing in the mosque and other times I will be found worshipping in churches. If in the judgment of the Sharee'ah I am a sinner yet with regard to the knowledge of reality I am obedient" (Haadee Al- Madkhalee, 1999, p. 20). Here, he demonstrates that even though outwardly, he is disobeying Allah, he is internally one with Allah in his viewpoint that God resides everywhere within all religions, and in recognizing that, he believes that he is being obedient to Allah's will.

In my ISP gallery, I aim to highlight certain themes to symbolically represent an idealistic depoliticization, internalization, decolonization, and personalization of religion through a shift to Sufism. I theorize that the man-made Sunni Shi'a split can be alleviated through this process, and this forced and unnatural duality can be mitigated.

In my works, I aim to manifest the Sufi principles of duality, minimalism, and repetition. Duality is something that is talked about in Sufism as one of the primary tenants, particularly within Whirling Dervishes and how they choose to practice (Helminski 2013) When they spin, they revolve with their right palm facing up and their left facing down, symbolizing the duality between the heavens and the earth, and transmission of energy from one to the other through the body, which just serves as a vessel. Rabi'a, the first female Sufi mystic, writes that love for Allah should never come from fear of hell, nor desire for paradise (Helminski, 2003). This duality is one that is extremely important to note in the context of Sufism and a broader look at the origin of deeds for Muslims.

I aim to highlight certain themes to symbolically represent an idealistic depoliticization, internalization, decolonization, and personalization of religion through a shift to Sufism. I want to convey the notion that the man-made Sunni Shi'a split can be alleviated through this process, and this duality can be mitigated. The notion is, does the inherent duality of a mystical, Sufi doctrine and religion ease the man-made duality created between groups, people, and even individuals of the same broader religion? As seen in the principles of Sufi mystics Ibn 'Arabee and Abdul-Kareem al-Jeelee, all religions are one in the same if the belief in Allah exists, so where are divides created if not by man, and where does room exist for forced splits and duality?

I use symbolism of whirling dervishes as a very clear and obvious physical representation of Sufis. However, in all incorporations of them, I include hints of repetition, movement, or duality to represent different tenants of Sufi thinking and practice. Additionally, I aim to incorporate Islamic number theory, physical and astronomical graphs, and modular graphs, along blueprints of masjids, and other very regimented, firm diagrams and lines in order to both highlight rigidity in current systems, but also a shift into the educated and enlightened, pure

potential of Islam as an alternative to viewing things as rigid and nothing else. Through juxtaposing these symbols with bones and human anatomical drawings, I present both the anatomy of spaces and of people as something regimented and constructive, but material and repetitive. Additionally, I use symbols of politics and power also, such as the Moroccan dirham and flag (after discussing how to do so sensitively within artist communities). In some pieces, the king's eyes are missing from the Moroccan dirham, and in others, his gaze is present. The duality among this is one that can be discerned by each individual, particularly with the perceptions in Morocco that the king is the Commander of the Faithful, and an intermediary between Muslims and Allah, when in reality, what does he really do and see if he thinks that individuals cannot connect with Allah on their own?

With my use of geometry, I aim to highlight what El Alamy (2015) dissected regarding Lalla Essaydi's work about the use of circles versus other shapes. The circle represents something wholesome and complete, something very God-like, whereas other shapes have a starting point and an ending point. He also talked about the verse of the Qur'an, Surah Iqhlās, where it is written (and I paraphrase) that Allah was neither born nor gives birth, again highlighting this circular notion. With this concept in mind, I used geometry to convey different notions throughout my pieces through modular, number theory graphs, along with other symbols found in Islamic Science by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. While experimenting with circular vs. angular, I played with the idea of circles being constructed out of very angular and regimented threadwork, and the symbolism that may convey regarding the Sufi duality of man and God living in cohesion within every human being. Doing so was extremely meditative and repetitive, which also was a process I sought out as repetition, particularly of movement and recitation, is a critical element of Sufism.

Late Ahmed Cherkaoui is also one Moroccan painter who stood out in an impactful way for my ISP gallery. Many distinct aspects of his work embody themes, symbols, and intentionality that I, too, aim to embody in my work. The intentionality behind his use of certain materials, including burlap as a manifestation of the common man in Morocco was interesting and thought-provoking. Since learning about this, I had been searching for found, local materials to use as surfaces. Because of the limited time that we had to work our ISPs and the unfamiliar culture and surroundings, this posed a challenge. However, even just using fibers in my work has become a dive into Moroccan culture, given the prominence of seamstresses, weavers, and other fiber craftsman all around the medina and the city.

Another facet that Cherkaoui beautifully incorporated into his work was ambiguity, particularly through his distortion of reality in work. The way that he chose to depict figures was ambiguous in itself, like the Hand of Fatimah as a covering of a self-portrait. However, even after the viewer is able to discern what it is that Cherkaoui is representing, there is a layer of ambiguity that stems from interpreting it in the context of post-colonial Moroccan art. Distortion, trickery, and ambiguity are elements from Cherkaoui's work that I replicate in my gallery space. (Ahmed Cherkaoui).

El Alamy's fascination with art that is not too telling and leaves room for viewer internalization and interpretation is one of the main inspirations for my work. Although I use certain symbolisms, colors, and compositions, I aim to distinguish my work with ambiguity. This can once again be tied back to Sufi principles of ambiguity, particularly ambiguity in one's relationship with Allah as something that is not clear, on display, or public. What occurs within the individual remains within the individual as nothing matters more than their intention and their connection with their God.

Mino Argento served as a huge inspiration on all three of my paintings for this series. Although he does not work with collage or fibers, the color palettes and geometric, cube-like, subtle drawings over the paintings stemmed from his experimental painting style. He says that his paintings are concerned with the absence of color, while only really incorporating color, and that the delicate appearance of his paintings made it so that every single gesture had to be intentional, repetitive, and cohesive. In my collage work, I was intrigued by Robert Morris, Jo Baer, Jesus Perea, Kacper H Kiec, and Hollie Chastain, as they all worked with distortion, repetition, minimalism, and trickery.

Finally, the works are not meant to engage the viewer or bring them in to the piece. They exist on their own, without regard for the people who are looking at it. They are all created in a fully passive gaze, and one that does not need a viewer to engage with it, nor asks for that in flow and direction. There is no eye contact, there is no yearning for approval, there is no reaching for validation. These works do not exist for the sake of the viewer, or to speak with the viewer, which again ties back to the personalization, internalization, and reclaim of individuality in religion with no intermediaries and no need for permission, approval, or gaze in order to exist.

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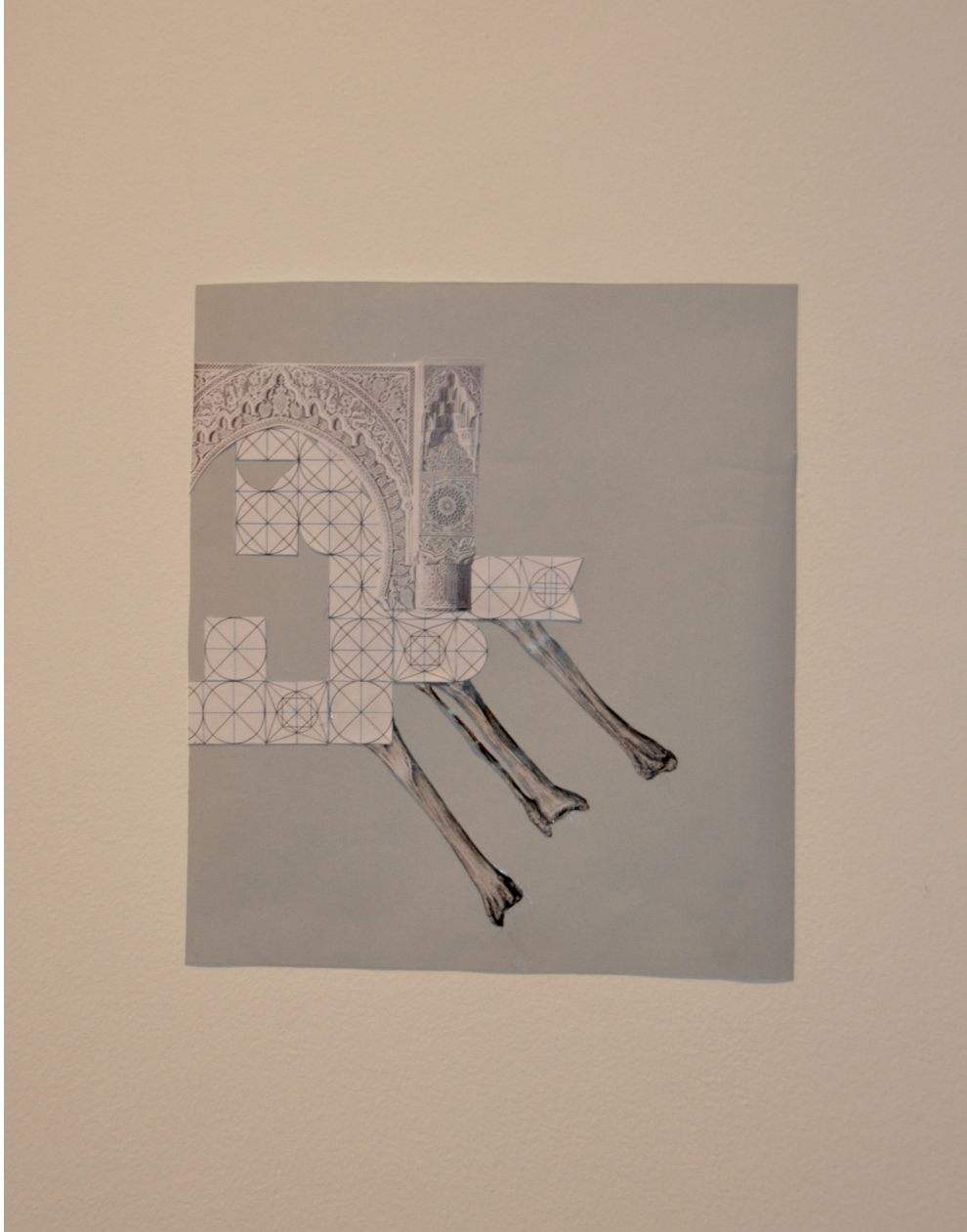
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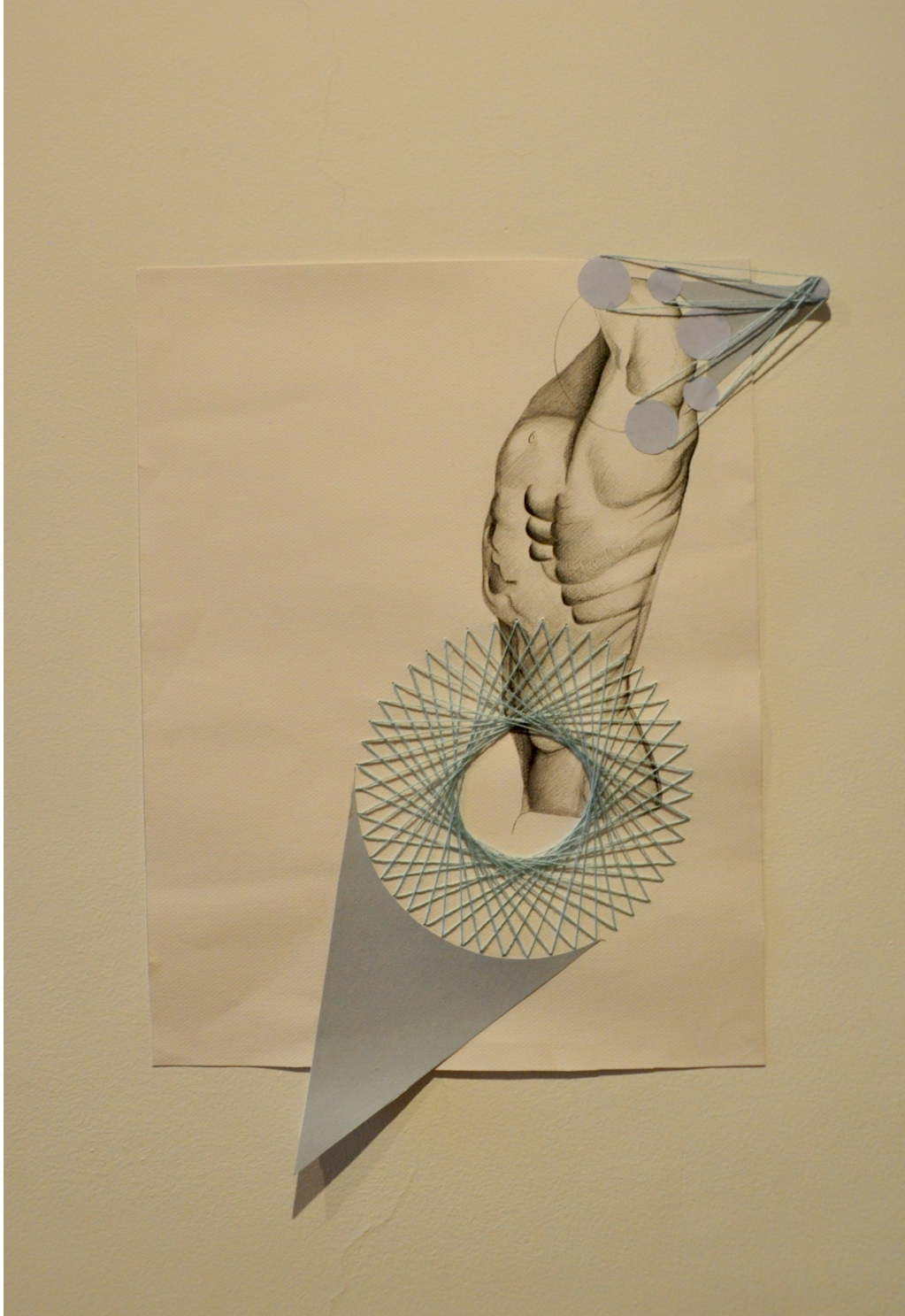
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dead man's tetris, 2015

Mixed Media

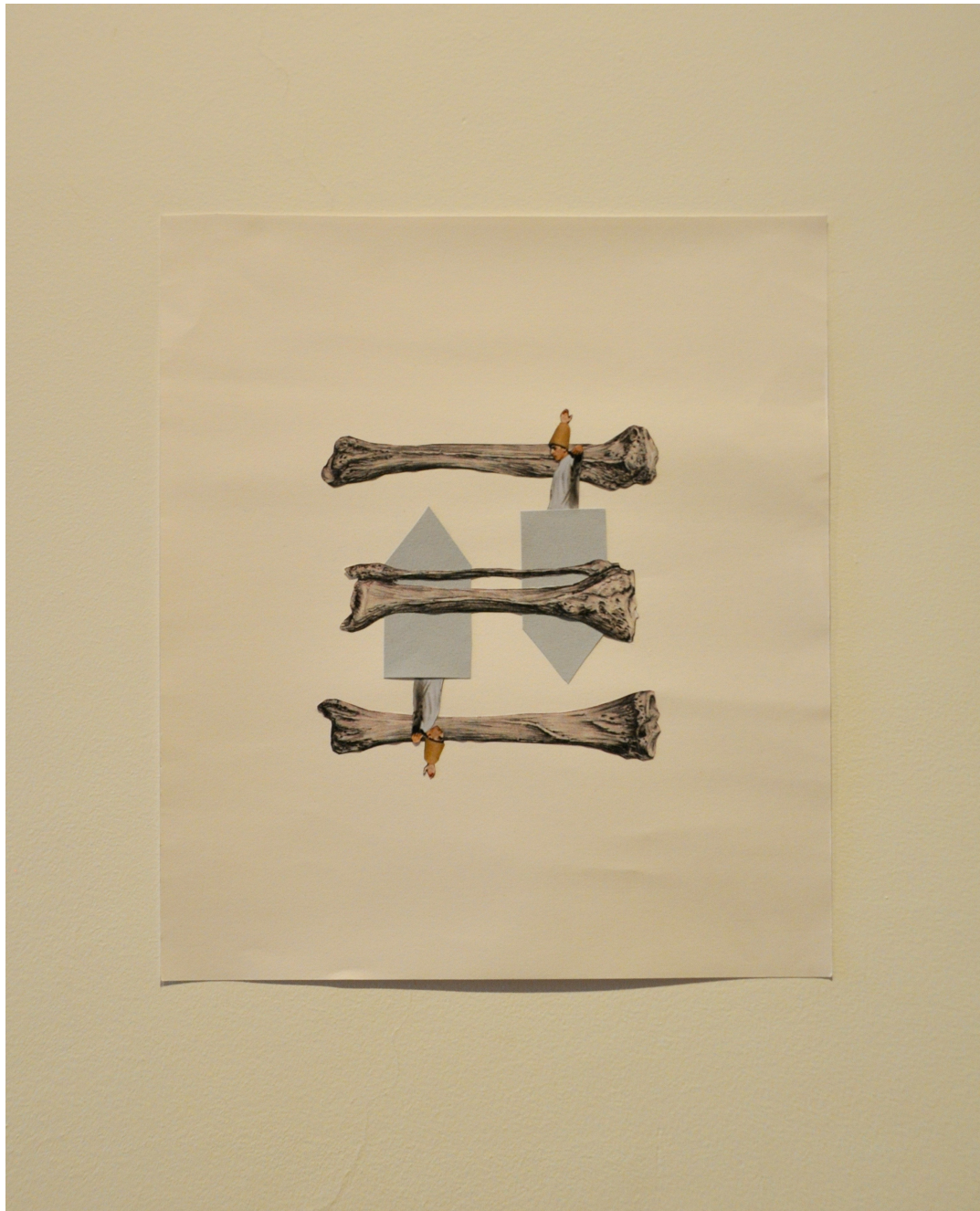
24 x 20



fkn dead, 2015

Mixed Media

38 x 30



tiny tortures, 2015

Collage

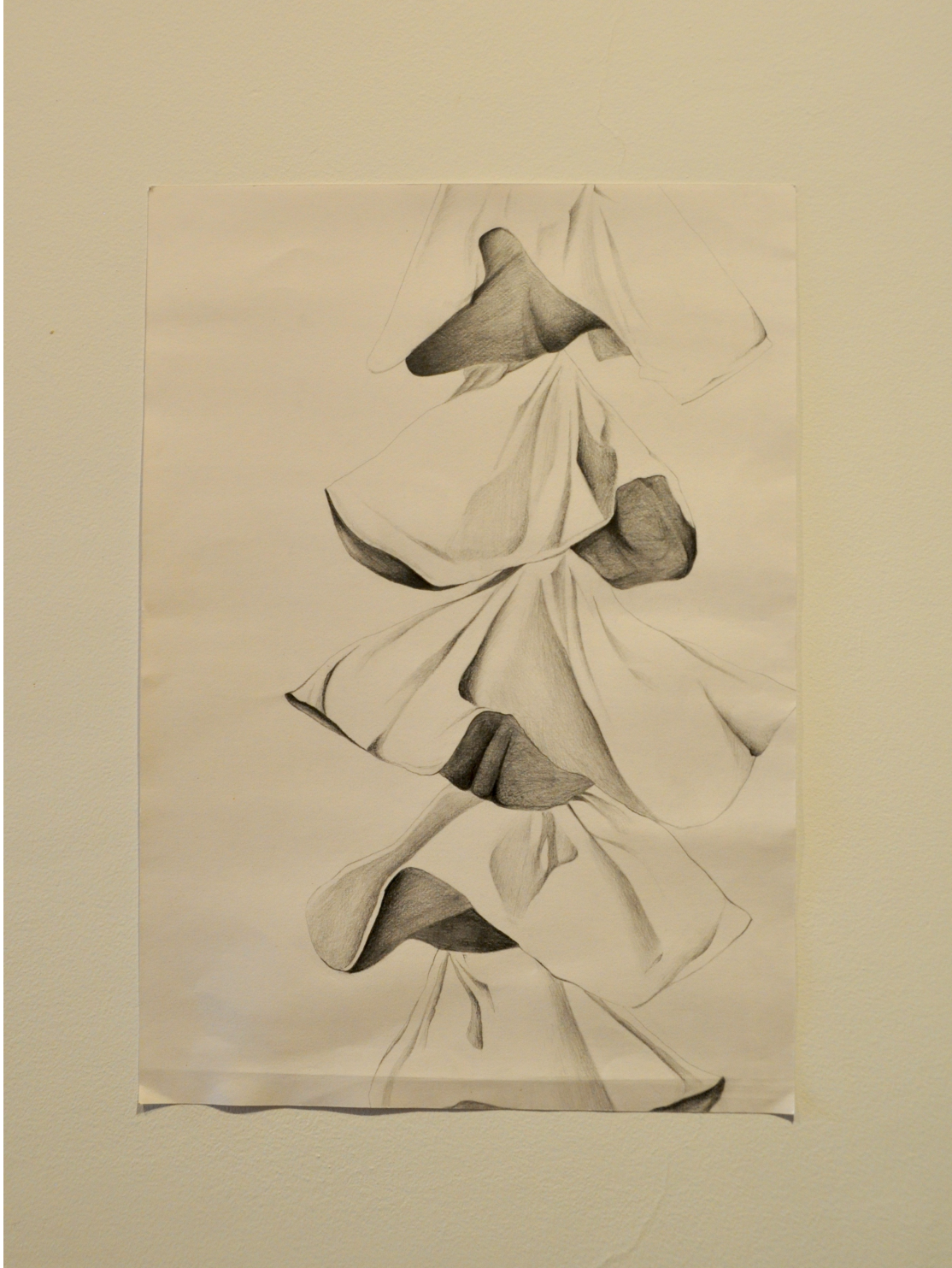
34 x 30



sultan's request, 2015

Mixed Media

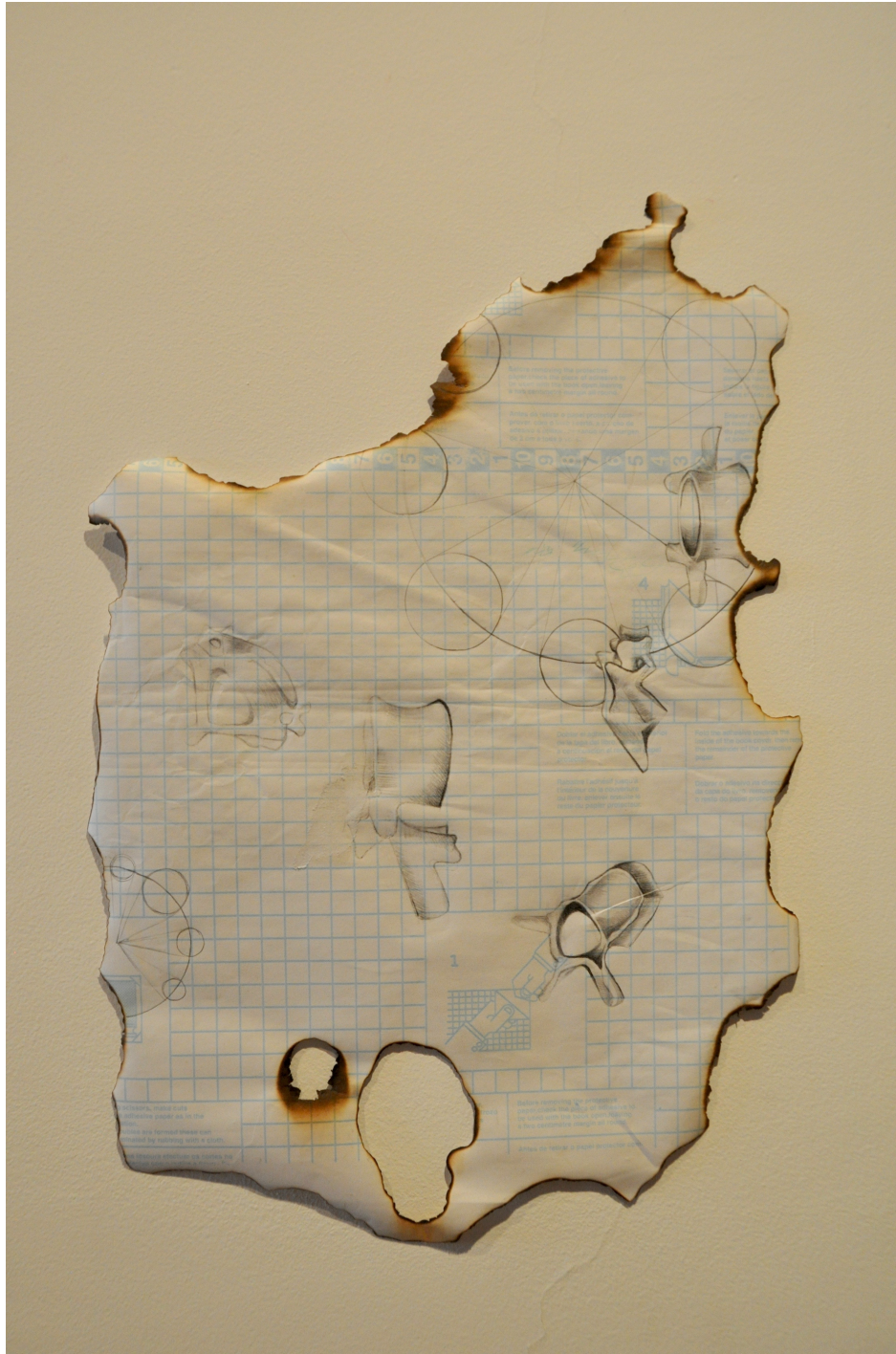
30 x 38



golden diva, 2015

Drawing

42 x 30



physics for everyone, 2015

Drawing

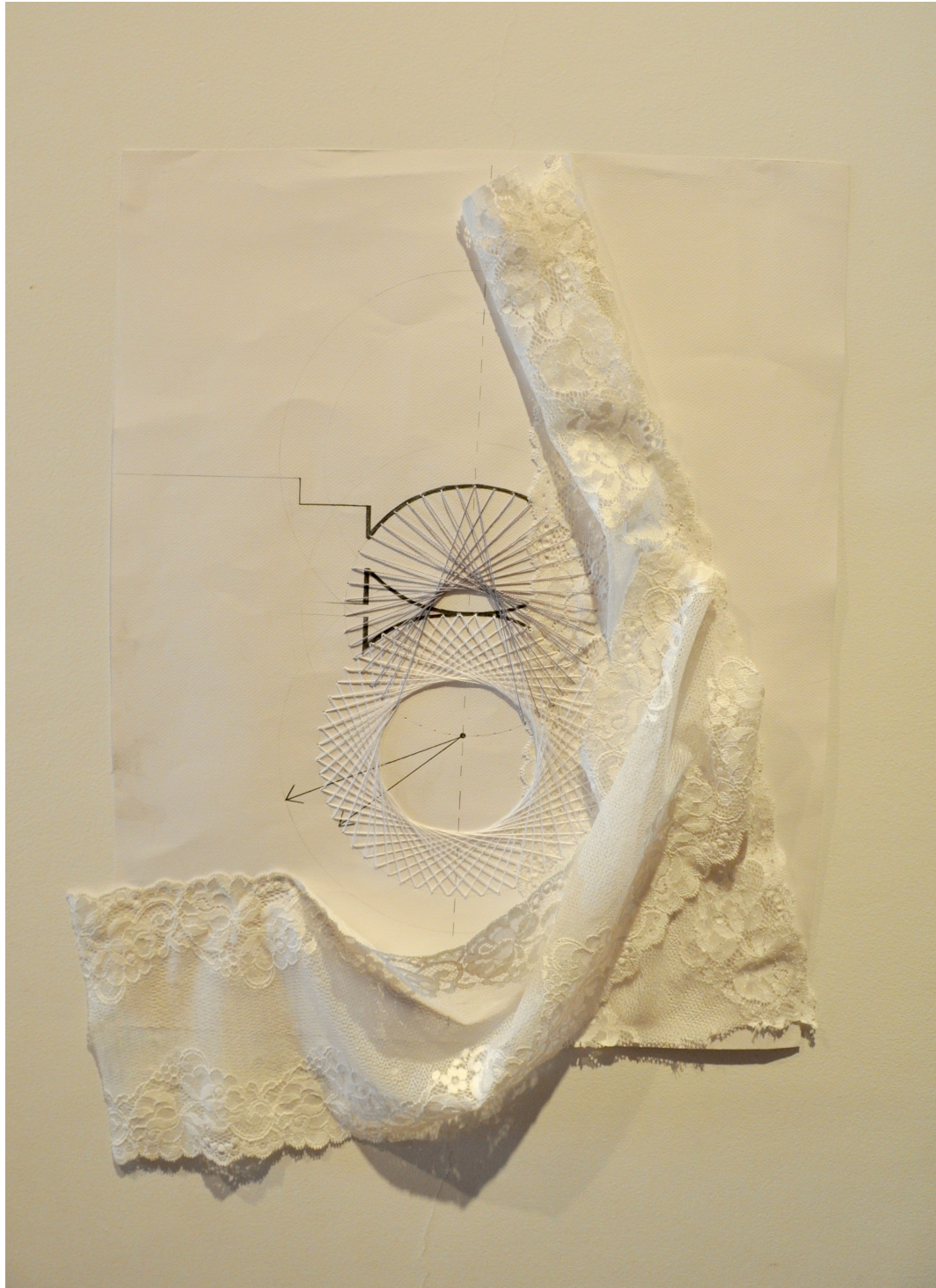
42 x 30



computer face/pure being, 2015

Mixed Media

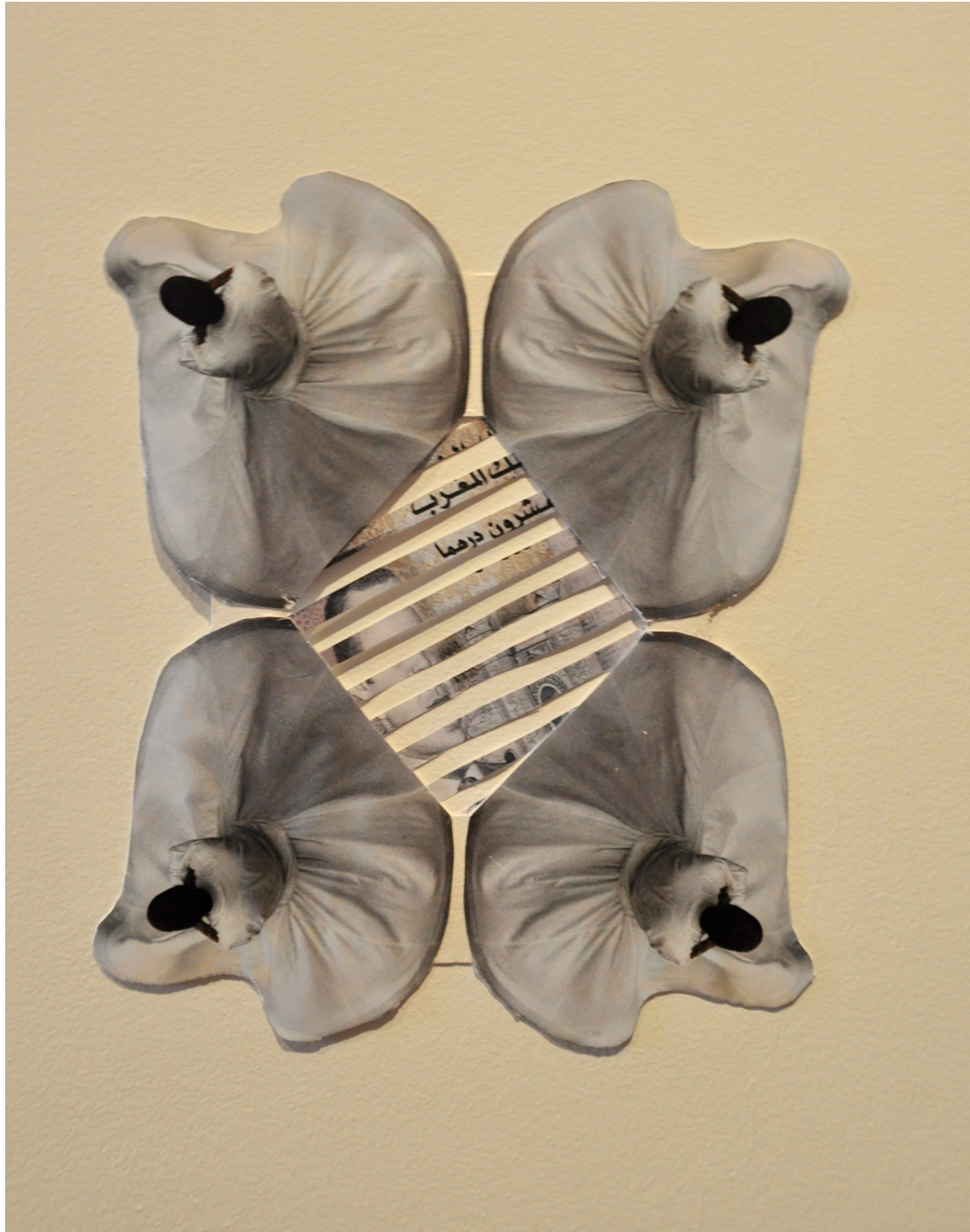
27 x 22



paper crane gang, 2015

Collage

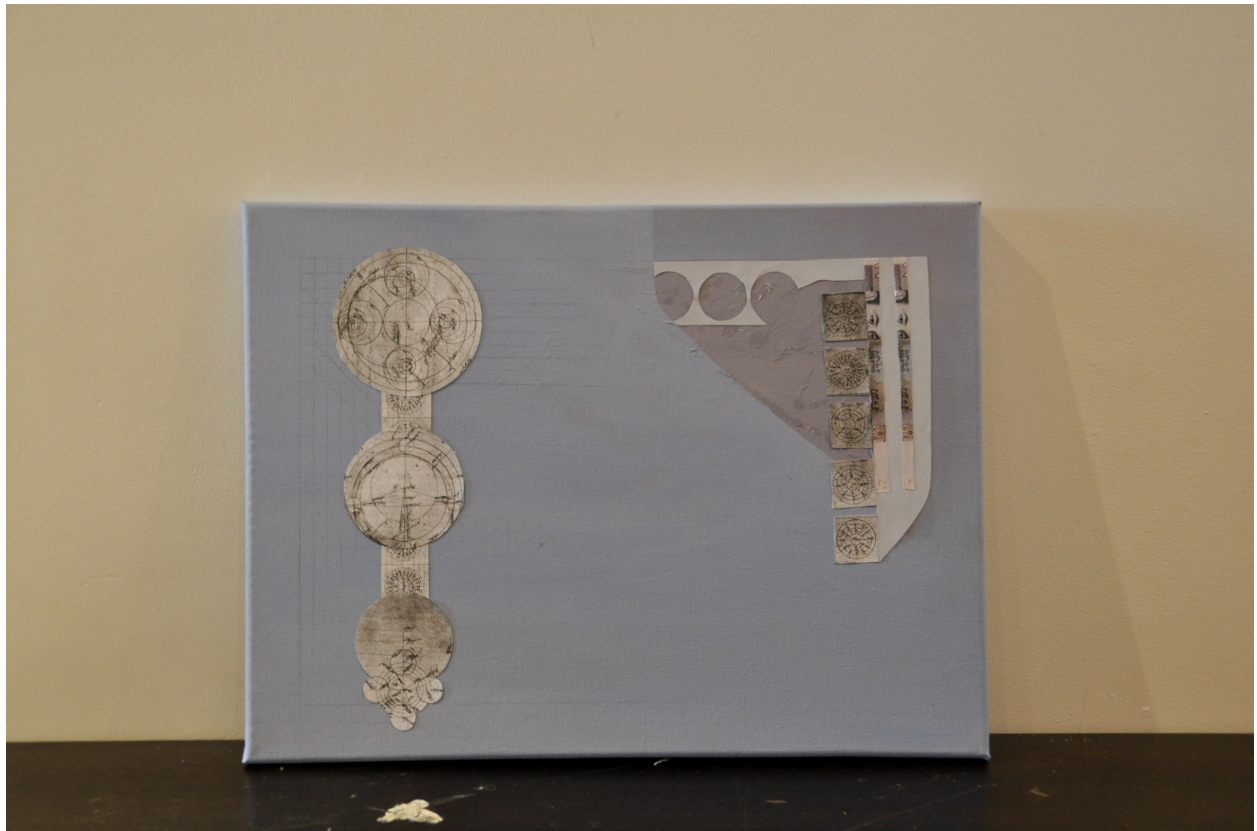
50 x 35



clock catcher, 2015

Collage

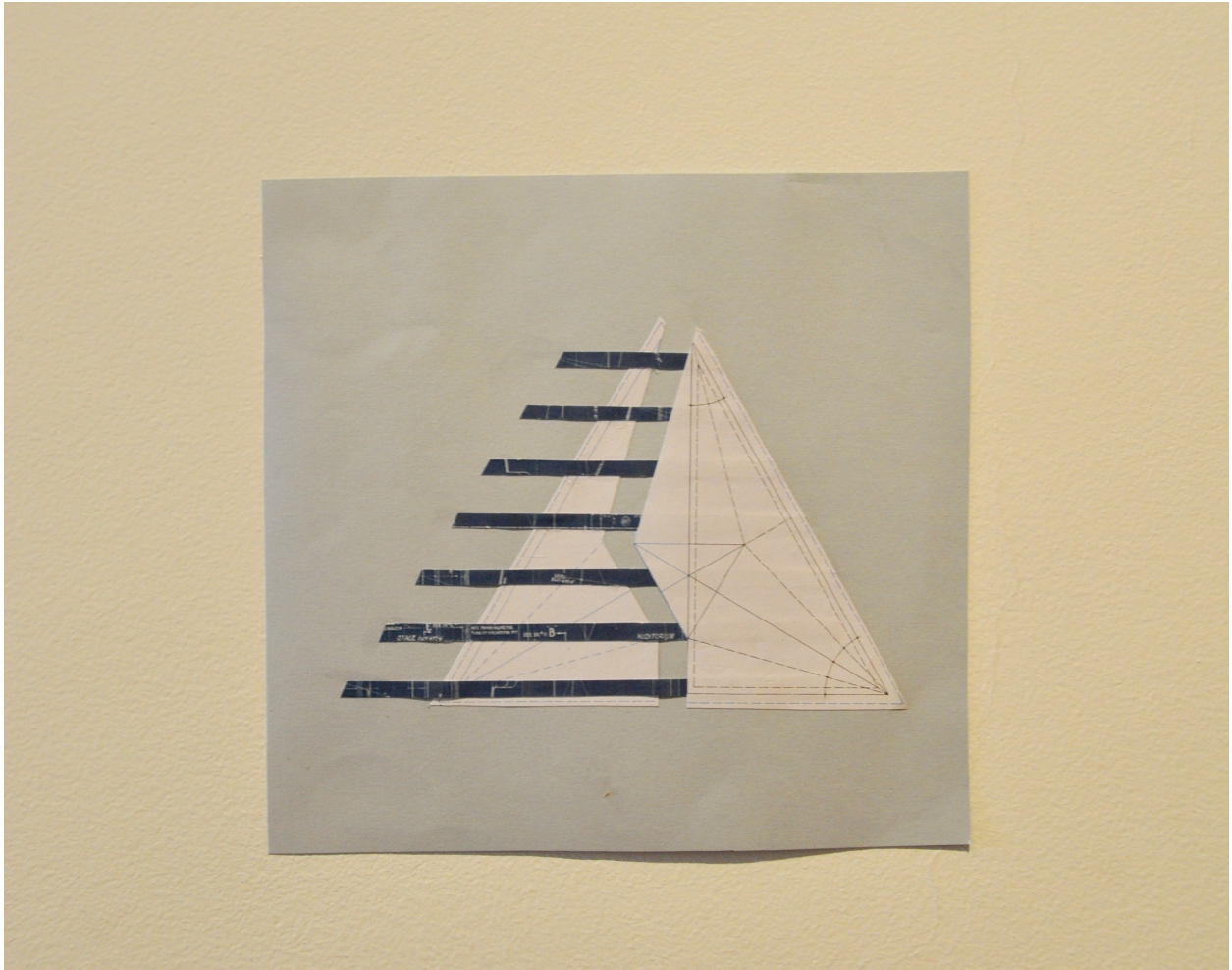
20 x 22



satelllllllllliteee, 2015

Mixed Media

30 x 38



beginners falafel, 2015

Collage

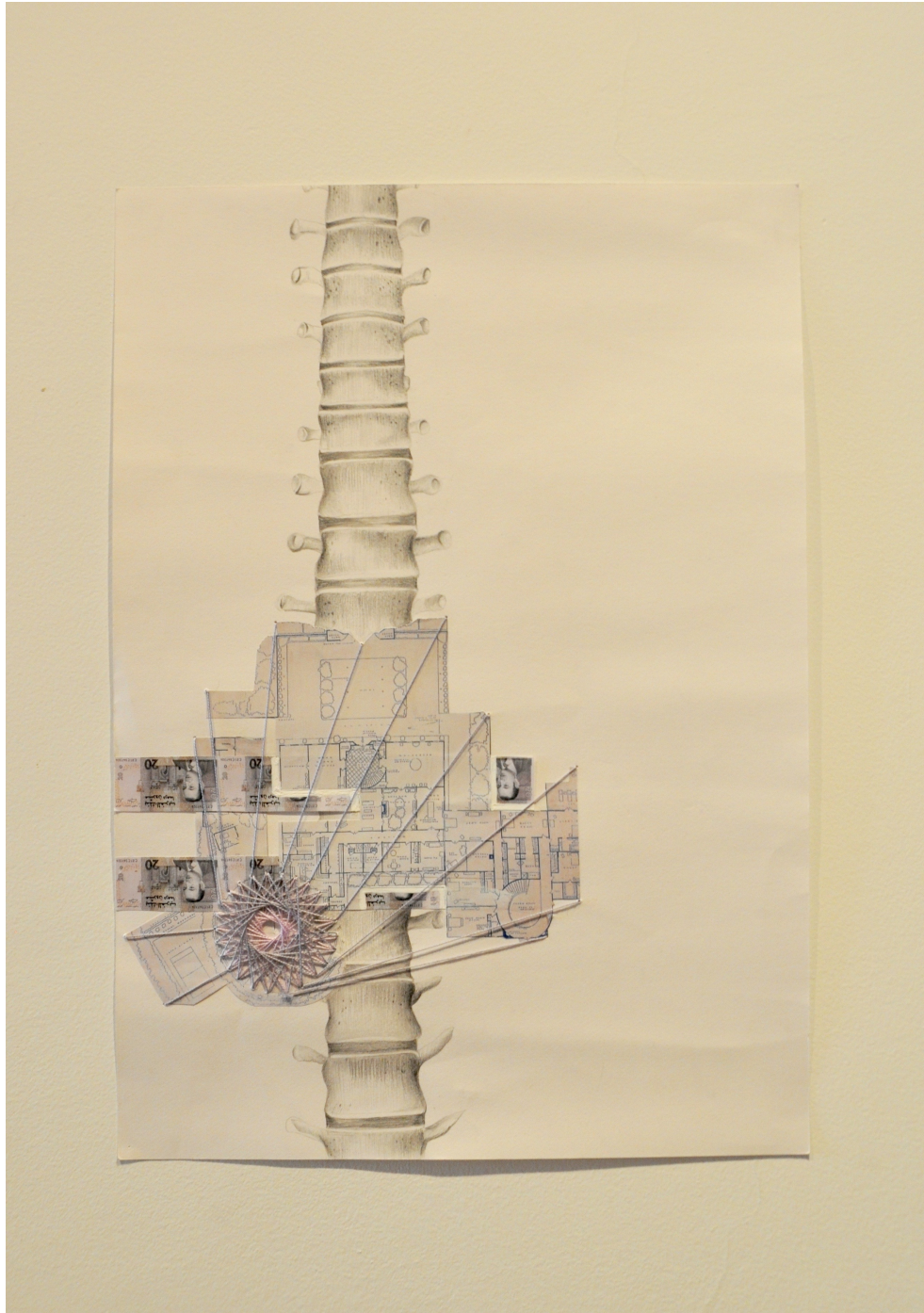
18.5 x 19.5



ready err not, 2015

Mixed Media

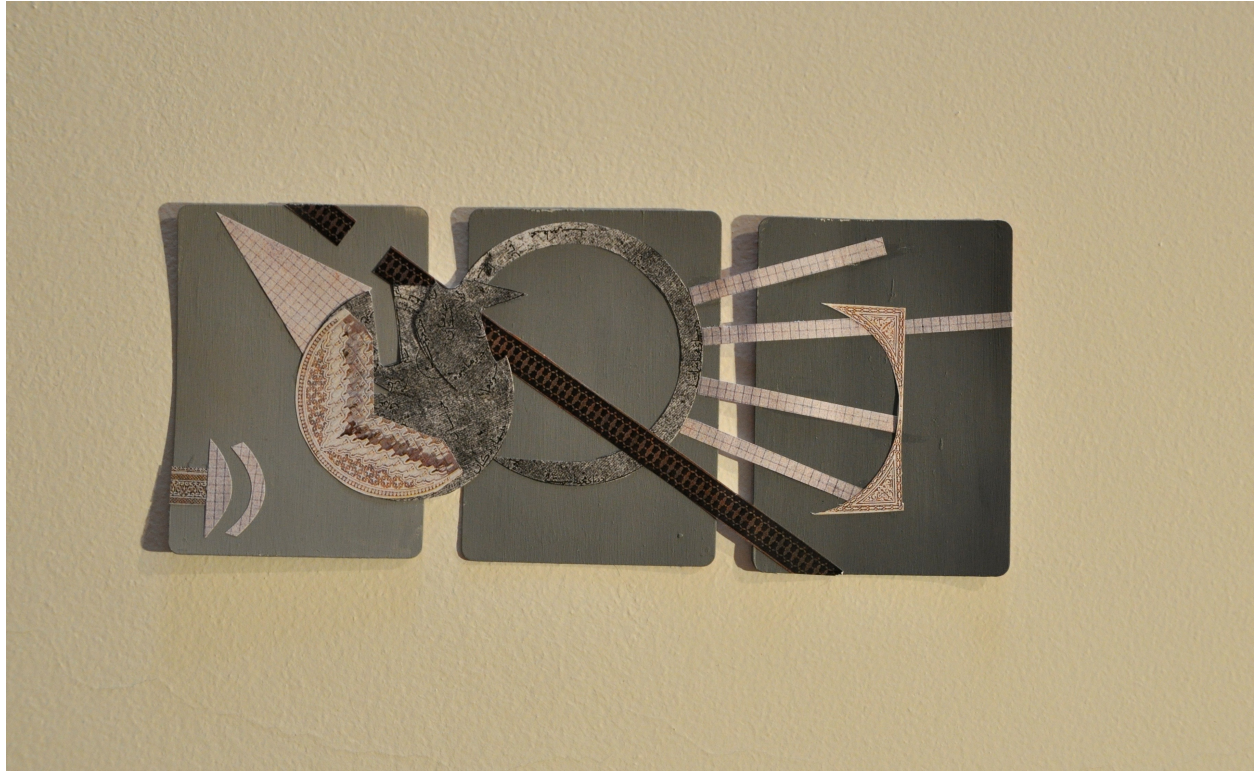
50 x 40



descent into madness, 2015

Mixed Media

42 x 30



galaxy in janaki, 2015

Collage

8.5 x 21